



Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 174 | July 26, 2012

The Message Behind Secretary Clinton's Trip to Mongolia

BY ALICIA CAMPI

Alicia Campi, Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington and President of the US-Mongolia Advisory Group, writes that “The secretary said that she was inspired by the Mongolian people’s commitment to democracy and refuted arguments that somehow democracy was unsuited to Asian history and values.”

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has completed another whirlwind international trip, this time covering France, Mongolia, Japan, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Egypt and Israel. While in Mongolia she pointedly asserted that countries cannot have economic liberalization without eventually transitioning to democracy. Her remarks were perceived by some international media and financial investment analysts as highly critical of the brand of Asian economic development practiced by China, which dismisses democratic values in the name of internal security. During her 20-hour overnight trip to Ulaanbaatar she repeatedly endorsed the Mongolian democratic process. Several times she extolled Mongolia as an example of economic modernization in tandem with democratic and civil society reforms. Mrs. Clinton urged people to come to Mongolia to witness the young dynamic democratic country unfold: “Against long odds, surrounded by powerful neighbors who had their own ideas for Mongolia's future, the Mongolian people came together with great courage to transform a one-party communist dictatorship into a pluralistic political system.”

Mongolia, the 101st country visited by Secretary Clinton, is a nation basking in the international limelight. Its economy, which grew at a rate of over 17 percent last year and is predicted to surpass that figure in 2012, has been singled out because of its rich coal, gold, copper, rare earths and uranium deposits. Furthermore, Mongolia's international profile was heightened in July 2011 when it assumed the chair of the Community of Democracies, an intergovernmental organization committed to strengthening democratic norms and practices within emerging democracies worldwide.

This Northeast Asian nation, with a population of only 2.8 million that is landlocked between Russia and China, has been through a tumultuous spring parliamentary election campaign. One highlight was the controversial arrest on charges of corruption and captured live on national television of former President N. Enkhbayar—dressed only in his pajamas and bare-footed. Despite Enkhbayar's reputation as the “Father of Mongolian Corruption,” this incident drew condemnation from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and other world leaders, including some US politicians who were more troubled, it seems, about Mongolian arrest procedures than the merits of the charges.

Thankfully, concerns about the potential for fraud and violence on the day of the election, June 28, proved unfounded. Mongolia has now for the sixth consecutive time, since 1990, peacefully transferred power to a new government. The new incoming government will be a coalition of three parties dominated by the Democratic Party (DP) and includes the MPRP-MNDP “Justice” Coalition and the Civil Will Green Party. Candidates for Prime Minister and Parliamentary Speaker, N. Altankhuyag and



Asia Pacific Bulletin | July 26, 2012

“If Mrs. Clinton wanted to get China’s attention, her trip to Mongolia definitely succeeded.”

Z. Enkhbold, respectively, worked with President Ts. Elbegdorj, also from the DP, to engineer a break from the typical pattern of political infighting to quickly produce an agreement for multi-party power-sharing. However, it is likely that this new populist government will support legislation less attractive to investors from big foreign mineral companies.

After her arrival from Tokyo, Secretary Clinton immediately proceeded to a series of meetings with President Elbegdorj, outgoing Prime Minister S. Batbold and outgoing Foreign Minister G. Zandanshatar. During these bilateral meetings, she discussed how to deepen US-Mongolia economic relations, including US participation in the large-scale Tavan Tolgoi coal mining project, which has been repeatedly delayed by complicated political maneuvering involving China, Russia, Japan, South Korea and the United States. Discussions on how to juggle massive foreign investment options are influenced by Mongolia’s national security “resource nationalism” concerns. President Elbegdorj stressed that mutually beneficial US-Mongolia economic ties would significantly elevate the relationship, and Mrs. Clinton endorsed boosting bilateral cooperation in education and people-to-people relations. Prime Minister Batbold also suggested inviting former US Ambassadors back to Ulaanbaatar this year to celebrate 25 years of bilateral US-Mongolia diplomatic relations. Other topics raised included US criticism of continued government corruption and a lack of transparency including pledges by all political parties to distribute the spoils of mineral wealth to the populace.

Mrs. Clinton, however, focused on the positive developments regarding Mongolia’s increasing profile in the international community and how the country fits into the Obama administration’s “pivot towards Asia” policy. Popular US Ambassador to Mongolia, Jonathan Addleton, who departed his post July 15th, commented that Secretary Clinton “affirmed support for Mongolian democracy while also making the case for strengthened commercial relations between the United States and Mongolia. On a more personal level, she noted that she first visited Mongolia seventeen years ago—in November 1995—as First Lady, a trip that left a lasting impression and cemented her own desire to one day return.”

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the East-West Center or any organization with which the author is affiliated.

EastWestCenter.org

Clinton’s major public speech was delivered to the International Women’s Leadership Forum attended by Kim Campbell, former Canadian Prime Minister, and former Kyrgyzstan President Roza Otunbayeva. The secretary said that she was inspired by the Mongolian people’s commitment to democracy and refuted arguments that somehow democracy was unsuited to Asian history and values. She steadfastly proclaimed that “Mongolia is a model of democracy in the region.” In addition, she addressed the fourth meeting of the Community of Democracies Governing Council by lauding democracies as more stable and capable partners with vibrant open economies that foster innovation and ideas: “As we have seen here in Mongolia, everyone has a stake in the growth of democracy.” Afterwards, she participated in the launch of the “LEND” Network—Leaders Engaged in New Democracies—to support democratization around the world, which Mrs. Clinton established last March in partnership with Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet.

Although Secretary Clinton’s trip was covered extensively by the US and international press, the response in the People’s Republic of China media was remarkably different. China’s official Xinhua news agency mentioned none of her pointed comments in its coverage. However, once the international media trumpeted her implicitly critical tone towards China, the Chinese Communist Party’s official newspaper, the *People’s Daily*, attacked the secretary’s right to comment on democracy in China by praising Mongolia’s “disorderly” version. Furthermore, a Chinese political journal claimed that the United States had a dark agenda in advocating democracy in Asia, and the Chinese microblogging site, Sina Weibo, which did quote Secretary Clinton’s remarks in Mongolia, was blocked. If Mrs. Clinton wanted to get China’s attention, her trip to Mongolia definitely succeeded.

Alicia Campi is a Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington and President of the US-Mongolia Advisory Group. She can be contacted via email at usmagcampi@aol.com.